

**Political History Collection
Interview H.0006.01 : Tape 1**

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Name: Surkhang Lhajam [Tib. zur khang lha lcam]
Gender: Female
Age: 74
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Abstract

Surkhang Lhajam [Tib. zur khang lha lcam] is the wife of the famous Surkhang Sawangchemmo. In this interview, she discusses his political activities and her own role in the Women's Association in the 1950s.

Tape 1

Q: Mola, I wanted to ask you something. In 1950, the Chinese came to Chamdo, right? At that time or just before that, where were you?

A: When the Chinese first came to Tibet we were in Kalimpong. We were not in Tibet. Sawangchemmo [Surkhang] was also in Kalimpong.

Q: Before the Chinese came?

A: Yes, but they were coming.

Q: So at that time Sawangchemmo was a kalön, right? So what was the reason he had come to India.

A: When the Dalai Lama was in Yadong, Sawangchemmo was there. Then when [the Dalai Lama] left for Lhasa, Sawangchemmo went as far as Gyantse. There he was not keeping too well so took leave and came to India.

Q: So at that time the Dalai Lama had already come to Yadong?

A: Yes.

Q: Before Sawangchemmo came to Yadong, where was he?

A: He was there in the Kashag with the Dalai Lama.

Q: Yadong?

A: He was at Lhasa and was with the Dalai Lama when they came to Yadong. So while staying for a year at Yadong, Sawangchemmo was there. Then Sawangchemmo and his party were those who asked the Dalai Lama not to go back to Tibet. Some kudrak were saying the Dalai Lama should go back, and that the 17-Point Agreement had been signed and it was not so bad; that there was no danger and that the Dalai Lama should return to the capital. So Sawangchemmo was among those who asked the Dalai Lama not to go, right. Anyway, the other side were more powerful. So Sawangchemmo said he doesn't dare to go back and that it is difficult to live with the Chinese. He was also really not keeping too well, and he said that he was going to go see a doctor. When he came to Kalimpong, at first he did not want to return.

Q: During this time, when Sawangchemmo and others were saying that the Dalai Lama should not return and that it was better to come to this side [India]. So if the Dalai Lama did come, was there any support from the outside? Were there any talk like that?

A: It seemed that there was no clear support from the outside. If there was, then it would have been very good.

Q: When Sawangchemmo was in India, did he have any relations (meet) with anyone?

A: There didn't seem to be any welcome from the Indian government, so without that, if the Dalai Lama came to India, it would be very difficult. I sort of remember others mentioning this to Sawangchemmo. That is what we heard, but the nitty gritty facts we wouldn't know, right? It was said that they hoped to get something from America, but America didn't do anything.

Q: So during this time in 1950, did anybody come from the American Consulate at Kolcutta?

A: No. Nobody came to see Sawangchemmo.

Q: During this time didn't Yuthok Sawangchemmo make some connections with the American Embassy

A: Yuthok Sawangchemmo it was said, had connections with Phünkang Lhajam. At that time it was much later, around 1959.

Q: No, in the 1950s.

A: Yes, it was in the 1950s. But nobody came to make any relations with Sawangchemmo.

Q: So after he came from Yadong, there was no such thing?

A: No.

Q: At that time, in 1950, where was Kungö Shakabpa.

A: Kungö Shakabpa - he also used to go to Yadong for the meetings. He was permanently settled in Kalimpong.

Q: So the Dalai Lama returned from Yadong, right. Then Kungö Tshipön [Shakabpa] must have returned to Kalimpong, right?

A: Yes, he returned. It is said that Kungö Tshipön was also among those who asked the Dalai Lama not to return.

Q: So the Dalai Lama had gone to Lhasa and at that time you and Sawangchemmo were residing in Kalimpong; Kungö Shakabpa too. So they gained the upper hand and took the Dalai Lama, right?

A: Yes. He went to Tibet. In the 17-Point Agreement it said that everything would remain as before, like the status of the Dalai Lama, the practice of religion by the monks, the ranks of the monk and lay officials, and that there was nothing to worry about regarding all this, that they had really come to help Tibet, to develop it -- that at this point in time there was nothing in Tibet like hospitals, schools, roads, [so they were coming] to help the people of Tibet and that once all this was done and the Tibetans could look after themselves, then we will hand over everything since we are not going to stay. So it was said that this was what they had said.

Q: Yes. So you were in Kalimpong, right? And the Dalai Lama had gone from Yadong. So having arrived in Kalimpong, was there any talk of starting an association in Kalimpong, of starting relations with foreign countries? Shakabpa was also in Kalimpong.

A: Regarding the starting of a group, at that time Kungö Shakabpa came once or twice so they must have had some internal discussions. Then there was a Khenjung, who was working in the Trade Mission. He came often.

Q: You are talking about Ganden Villa Khenjung, right?

A: Yes. No. Not the Ganden Villa one. His name was some Lobsang something.

Q: That must be the one. Maybe. So Sawangchemmo's work of bringing the Dalai Lama to India sort of didn't work out, right?

A: Yes.

Q: So he saw it was not the correct thing and [question not finished]

A: Yes. He was among those who said that the Dalai Lama should not go to Tibet and so if he then went towards the Chinese, then they would not like him.

Q: So he came to this side. Did he come to this side because politically they didn't get along well, or what?

A: He said he was sick and took leave, however, the real reason was that things didn't work out? Isn't it?

Q: Mola, did you remember Sawangchemmo saying anything, for example like, Oh we said many things and they didn't listen? What was he feeling?

A: He said that "We did whatever we could, but that some of the kudrak didn't have minds that could think; that they were stupidly stubborn [Tib. lkugs pa u tshug]. If the Dalai Lama was taken to Tibet, the moment he came under the Chinese, it was very difficult". The Chinese are very clever politically [Tib. srid don mkhas po]. He said, "There is this so-called 17-Point Agreement, but you just watch, they won't stick to it. There is no way it will last [Tib. gnas thabs yod ma red]. Their main aim, their main enemies, are the leaders [Tib. dpon po], the religious practitioners and the monks-- what to say, the feudal elements. These will never be left alone. Therefore, I wonder what they will do". Sawangchemmo knew the communist system from a long time ago. He knew a lot.

Q: How did he come to know these things?

A: There were some Mongolians, some Mongolian monks. He knew from them.

Q: So it is 1951 and in 1952 you had come to Kalimpong. So while you were staying like that, what happened? Later you went back, right?

A: So at Kalimpong he went to Kolcutta for medical treatment. It took about a month. Then he said that he wanted to stay in Kalimpong.

Q: At that time, he had no connections with say the Americans and others?

A: No, he did not. Uncle Yuthok [Sawang] at that time was there.

Q: Wasn't Heinrich Harrer also there?

A: No. While staying at Kalimpong, there were a lot of letters coming from Tibet. Sawangchemmo's father and mother were telling him that he should return to Tibet and that it was not good that he should stay away like that. Letters were sent one after another. They said that the way things are it doesn't look like the Chinese will do anything bad so it's better to return. The foremost Chinese leaders had also approached Sawangchemmo's parents and said, "Surkhang Kalön is an educated man, so what is the use if he stays in another people's country. He should return and not stay in a foreign country. We are only helpers and developers here in Tibet and not here to do harm [Tib. gnod pa skyel mkhan] so there is absolutely nothing to fear. You are the mother and it seems that he cares a lot for his mother and will do whatever you tell him to do and so please write to him as his mother and ask him to return." They also told his father to ask Sawangchemmo to return, and letters kept coming one after another. [One letter said] "Parents will not give poison water to a son, so son there is no need to be suspicious. These days things are good. Even the Dalai Lama has returned and so it seems like in the future things will not get bad.

Q: When you left did people come to receive you.

A: Yes, they did. Sawangchemmo still said that he will not go back and will resign, saying I'm not keeping too well and all the children are also here in India. So we sent a letter stating these things, but instead they send people to receive us, servants and horses and mules, everything. Then he went.

Q: So this was in 1952 right?

A: Yes.

Q: In 1952 didn't a lot of kudrak and others also return to Tibet?

A: You mean back?

Q: Yes.

A: Tsarong Kungö were also there.

Q: Yes, it seems it was around that time.

A: Yes, Tsarong Kungö returned as did the mother of the Dalai Lama, Yabshi Gyeyum Chemmo [Tib. rgyal yum chen mo], and her family.

Q: Did they perceive that things were not so bad?

A: Yes they perceived that things were very good. Those who were staying there were also thinking that it was really not so bad. That's why many left.

Q: So did many leave [for Lhasa] around 1952?

A: Yes, many did. Among the bigger kudrak, Tsarong and our Sawangchemmo went. Then we went.

Q: So in 1952 did all of you go?

A: Yes, all. Kungö Surkhang Rimshi had trade matters regarding the [Tibetan] Trade Mission [Tib. tshong don] so he stayed.

Q: What work did this Trade Mission do?

A: You know, the Tibetan government had some trading matters, etc.

Q: Was it the old Trade Mission or was it something new, started after the Chinese came.

A: It was there before the Chinese came. Whatever the Tibetan government needed, they did.

Q: Later after the Chinese came, there was this Procurement Office [Tib. mkho sgrub las khungs] right?

A: After the Chinese came, this Trade Mission was done away with. After they came, all the trade associations with India were shelved [Tib. bsdu gsog zhus].

Q: So during this time was Pandatsang also in it?

A: Yes, he was there. When the 13th Dalai Lama was there Pandatsang was the Private Trade Mission [Tib. sku sge tshong don] of the Dalai Lama.

Q: They were at Kalimpong, right? So what work were they doing?

A: Getting the supplies for the government and at Gangtok talking about politics.

Q: You mean with the Political Officer [Tib. 'bras spyi blon chen]?

A: Yes.

Q: I have seen in some documents that Pandatsang wanted to buy gold for the Tibetan government. Was it during this time?

A: This gold buying was before the Chinese came.

Q: Before that?

A: Before the Chinese came there was Trekhang Kungö Khenjung, Surkhang Kungö Rimshi, Pandatsang and Shakabpa. They were sent by the government to America to buy gold.

Q: No, in the 1950s there was something about Pandatsang wanting to buy gold for the Tibetan government.

A: You mean Pandatsang privately?

Q: No, for the government. There was this gold buying in the old days.

A: In the 1950s I don't think Pandatsang bought gold.

Q: I have seen some kind of documents about it.

A: Maybe it was private, otherwise the government sent about 4 representatives.

Q: Yes, yes, I know that. It had to do with the Tibetan money not having any backing in gold and so they went for that. So, in 1952 returned and he resumed his kalön work?

A: He had taken sick leave, but he was still the kalön. When he went there he immediately resumed attending the Kashag.

Q: Yes, so that was in 1952. When you returned, how was the situation in Lhasa?

A: By then the Chinese had come, right? What should I say, they must have been suspicious because he didn't come and stay. Even at Yadong when the kudrak split into groups, Sawangchemmo was among those who didn't like the Chinese. He was the most suspected of all and they did not have trust in him.

Q: However, generally speaking there were many who said that things were not so bad, around 1952, 53, right?

A: Sawangchemmo knew all along that they were just temporarily tricking us and that in the long run it was no good. So he had no belief in them, not at all. And even when he was staying at home he used to play the game "go" [Tib. mig mangs] all the time. If outside people came and asked about political matters he suspected that they may be spies and always stayed speaking just playing [the game] "go". There was always this Muslim friend and an old Kungö Chaluwa [Tib. cha lu ba] who used to come everyday to the house.

Q: So after you returned, then you stayed there all the time?

A: Yes.

Q: Throughout 1952, 53, 54, and 55?

A: Yes. He had the Kashag work and the Chinese put him in charge of road building [Tib. lam bzo do dam pa]. The workers were mostly Tibetans so it was said that if someone suitable was not appointed, then the people wouldn't listen to the Chinese. Then he was also in charge of the granary [Tib. 'bru khang las khung do dam pa] from the Tibetan government side. So he did this extra work. The Kashag he was already there.

Q: What was it called- something about Lam... some rukag, etc. Something about the brigade for building the motorable road from Nagchu to Ngari [Tib. nag mnga' rlang 'khor ru khag] so and so-- I have forgotten. So, in 1952, you were in Lhasa, right? And 1953?

A: Yes, then we stayed in Lhasa until 1959.

Q: Permanently? Didn't you come to India?

A: No.

Q: So during this time how was it? At the beginning there was an attempt to work together and then later things got worse and worse. How did it happen?

A: Sawangchemmo said that there was the 17-Point Agreement but the Chinese were not keeping to it. Whatever it is, they were

much stronger and so it seemed that there wasn't much that one could say. What they had first said to do, this and that, that had to be done. However, the Tibetan kalön were well educated and they spoke and acted diplomatically, tricking [Tib. mgo skor] them and so it lasted for 9 years.

Q: During 1952, do you have any recollection of the People's Association that rose up in Tibet? In Lhasa it was said that the prices of foodstuffs went up.

A: At the time, talking about the People's Association, Alo Chöndze started one. They held a demonstration and all that. Wasn't it said that Sitsab Lukhangwa was also against the Chinese? So the Chinese it seems didn't like Lukhangwa. So the Dalai Lama sent him to India.[Note he went at the end of 1956]

Q: During this time also there was the Women's Association and Youth League. How did that happen?

A: These were begun by the Chinese.

Q: Yes, even if the Chinese started them, without the permission of the Kashag it [question not finished]

A: At first they appointed the directors, the zhuren, then the Committee Members, the uyön and then they started the Standing Committee, the gyünle. They got people together and then the meetings begin from time to time. The Tibetan masses [common people] were not there. The Women's Association and Youth Leagues would meet often. In the Youth one there was Shölkang Jedrungla. At that time they all started going through the motions of doing too much without knowing what lay in the future. The youth were being very show-offish. Shölkang Jedrungla used to do too much. He used to give such lectures.

Q: Did you go to these lectures?

A: Yes, when the Youth and Women's [groups] used to meet together, they would ask us to come, we Uyön. They would give titles to all the big kudrak ladies and make them leaders.

A: Namla : All the uyön were the various Lhajam and the wives of older government officials, right?

A: Yes.

Q: Mola, what were you?

A: I was an uyön. I was not a Standing Committee member. The main Standing Committee person was Tangme Jamkusho [Tib. thang smad], Samling [Tib. bsam gling], Taring, then who?

A: Then there was one... was she a relative of Samling - Tsögo [Tib. mtsho sgo]?

A: Oh yes! Tsögo.

A: They were the four main ones.

A: Taring Ajala was appointed to the gyünle, but she did not talk "red-speech" [Tib. bka' mol dmar mo] . Samling and Tsögo and their type were very much against our old society. They said it was all rotten.

Q: They were against the old society because [question not finished]

A: They would say that today we women have a lot to be appreciative about the CCP. The communist party has given equality to women and it is just great that we can meet in an office.

A: Mola, I wanted to ask you one thing. Were Samling and Tsögo good in writing?

A: No, they were not.

A: I see!

A: They had good political views [Tib. Ita ba]

A: I see. So the fact that they worked hard in the Women's League, were they like the women of today who say that they want their rights? So was it from this point of view or was it a political leaning towards the Chinese?

A: It was from the women's rights perspective. Politics, they didn't know much. They were not that educated or deep-thinking. Tsögo was very poor in writing. Maybe later she got better. Tsepela [Tib. tshe dpal lags] later also became good in writing.

Q: So in the Youth League, Shölkang Ashangla [Jedrungla] got into trouble for taking photographs, right? Likewise, didn't Samling and Tsögo have similar problems?

A: No, they did not. It was like this: they wanted women to be highly respected. Women's equal rights, calling meetings and doing things in the meetings. They found some boldness [Tib. spobs pa rnyed].

A: When they were younger or when they got married, did their households sort of look down on them?

A: Yes. They were saying that in the old days we Tibetan women were hopeless. Even regarding school, it's like they didn't need education. They were just kept at home. So today the women are on a par with the men and can be educated. So they showed off a lot.

A: Their types used to ride motorcycles and act like males.

A: After the Dalai Lama came in 1959 and there was the revolt in Norbulinga and there were a lot of meetings for change, it is said that they really showed off too much, saying you are reactionaries [Tib. log spyod pa] and reprimanded a lot of Tibetans there. Tsepela, who was like a judge [Tib. khriims dpon], was the one who used to patrol and check up [Tib. skor gyeng] on everyone. It is said that she reprimanded [Tib. bka' sgyur] people a lot. Even if one didn't keep things clean outside she would give a criticism. She used to say what do you think about the old days? These days are not like that. Even now you are of the same old mind".

A: Mola, were they the ones who were absolutely engrossed and didn't stay and work in the house and got really involved in the Women's League.

A: Yes. They were absolutely engrossed in it. It wouldn't fade even for a day. The best writers was Taring. Tangme was also good. Tangme would say she was really something great [Tib. zhed po cig].

Q: So if we consider the period, in 1954 the Dalai Lama went down to China right?

A: Wasn't it 1955?

Q: It was the end of 1954. Here again was there one side saying the Dalai Lama should go down to China and other saying he should not.

A: No, I don't think so.

Q: You didn't hear anything like that?

A: That did not occur. At that time the Chinese were being very good.

Q: In 1954?

A: Yes and the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama were invited for a tour. They stayed for about a year.

Q: So when did things go bad. Suppose we say from 1952,53,54,55,56,57.

A: It got worse when the Dalai Lama went to India for the Buddha Jayanti. So it was around that time, I wonder what they were suspicious of.

Q: Yes, so in 1954 the Dalai Lama went down to China, right? During this time was there anything of concern then?

A: When the Dalai Lama went down to China there was a huge reception, right? However, they suspected that in the Kham area Tibetan lamas incited the people to revolt.

Q: When the Dalai Lama went down?

A: Yes, when he came up via Chamdo [on the way back]. They were not saying this about the Dalai Lama but they suspected that other lamas, it seems that they were referring to Trijang Rimpoché.

Q: Did they do such things?

A: I really don't know the internal matters. In the final analysis, the Chinese were against religion. So it's possible that they must have said something.

Q: So this was in 1954. Some say that when the Dalai Lama went down it was said that there was some talk in the government about whether he should go or not. Then when the Dalai Lama went down, some people were unhappy, some went insane and things like that were said to have happened and people all lined up for the Dalai Lama to pass by. When left for China where were you, Mola?

A: I was in Lhasa.

Q: So since the Dalai Lama was going down you must have had to go some place?

A: We all, the Women's Association and Youth Leagues, we were at Linga Sarpa [Tib. gling ga gsar pa] with flowers when the Dalai Lama passed by. Some were suspicious, saying that the Dalai Lama was going down to China and wondering what the Chinese would do. Because until now the Dalai Lama was in Tibet so they [the Chinese] were not able to do anything bad. If they were able to get rid of the Dalai Lama, then they will have everything in their hands, right? Some older people were saying this.

Q: So when the Dalai Lama went by was the procession like in the old days or did they do something new after the Chinese had come?

A: Like the old days.

Q: During this period, the Youth League and the Women's Association were something new. So according to the old system of protocol there was no place for this [women]. There was no relation between the Tibetan government, the Youth league and Women's Association. During these ceremonies when the Dalai Lama traveled they received and welcomed him. They also went to the large meetings. At the large meetings, the Dalai Lama didn't come very much. The two tutors did come.